

Homily for the Sunday of the Passion
(April 17, 2011)

Have you ever gotten into trouble for doing the right thing? For example: telling the truth when someone asks you your opinion and they become angry as a result. Or perhaps as a child, moved by remorse to admit to your parents you did something wrong and getting grounded for the effort.

You kind of expect a different reaction in both examples don't you? One would think that if a person asks your opinion, they are prepared to hear what you really think. One would also expect parents to be proud of you for being honest instead of grounding you for two weeks. So much for doing the right thing! It seems that sometimes what God requests of us only gets us into *more* trouble.

An extreme example of this is the story of The Rev'd Walter Sullivan, an Irish Presbyterian Minister living in Belfast, Northern Ireland. One day in the summer of 1981, Walter was walking along the road which divides the Roman Catholic part of town from the Protestant section when, peering down a long back ally, he noticed a Roman Catholic priest sprawled out on the ground; he had been mugged and left for dead by members of a militant Protestant group.

Immediately and without thinking Walter ran to the closest house and shouted at them to call for an ambulance. He then took off back down the ally where he arrived beside the priest, knelt down and tended to the man's wounds as best he could. When the ambulance finally arrived, they found Walter sitting on the wet pavement singing *Ave Maria*, holding the dead priest in his arms.

Word about what Walter did that day spread quickly throughout the Protestant community and what reward did this Good Samaritan receive? Well, he was asked to

leave his local pub and never return. He was asked to leave the parish in which he was serving. He was even told he was not welcome to attend the parish in which he had grown up. Walter was shunned by family, friends and colleagues and the betrayal was such that he eventually left Ireland altogether.

Many years have passed since that terrible day in the summer of 1981. Time has carried much water under the bridge. The pain in his soul has dulled, yet it will never go away completely. Still, sitting in his study today at St. Anthony's Roman Catholic Church, Father Walter Sullivan is at peace with his actions, content with the knowledge that he had acted according to the will of Christ. And that was enough for him.

In his writings Isaiah tells of one who has come to be called the Suffering Servant. There are many theories as to who this servant was or is: Some say the prophet is talking about Israel, some say he is prophesying about the Messiah, or Jesus and others say Isaiah was talking about himself. Whatever answer it is obvious that the Suffering Servant gets the bum wrap for obeying the will of God.

In our lection today, God has called that same servant to be a teacher to the Israelites in exile in Babylon. This teacher was to be taught by God and in turn, go to God's people with words of comfort and hope so as to sustain the weary, war-torn Israelites. He was called to proclaim to them that God had not abandoned the people completely; that they were loved and cherished by the Lord and that God would forgive them and wipe the slate of sin clean.

His words of hope however, were to a people caught in the depths of anger and despair; people acculturated in to the warring society of Babylon. So his words were heard as mocking and vanity and for his efforts the teacher of grace was shunned by his

own people and punished by the Babylonians: “I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.”

As a result of the servant’s obedience to God’s will, he is subjected to great suffering. For doing the *right* thing; for obeying God’s commandments the plain old servant of God becomes the *suffering* servant. If I was him I would feel betrayed and forsaken. I would question why a benevolent God would ask his servant to walk into such danger in the first place.

Have you ever noticed this trend in the Bible? God’s people usually end up in a very bad way. Those called by God to do his work, to be his hands and mouth seem to be the most persecuted people. I can think of Esther and Ruth, Judith and David and Jeremiah, St. Paul and all twelve apostles who end up as martyrs (that is die) for proclaiming the same message of peace, hope and love as their master did.

It happens in our own lives as well. We are fired from jobs because we stood up for the weak and poor by speaking out against corrupt company and societal practices. We are shunned by our secular friends for being a holy-roller and Jesus-freak. We are slandered by colleagues and family for our beliefs and some of us even die for the faith we live.

At a less extreme level, on the one hand our compassion is exploited by the greedy who seek to use our faith for their own profit while on the other hand they ignore us when we offer an opinion, seeing us as having nothing worthwhile to say.

What kind of God would request such sacrifices of those he claims to love? What kind of God would ask us to suffer? A God who willingly walked the same road! The

God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God we have come to know in Jesus Christ is a God who has keenly felt the pain of betrayal and hurt as we have. He is a God who has been rejected and despised by all his creatures, even by his own people.

The Lord knows well from experience that for those who seek to live in love and justice, for them suffering is inevitable. The powers of this world which seek a different, selfish agenda cannot stand those who spite their efforts by enacting mercy and compassion.

Maybe it's guilt. Maybe fear. So they throw all they can at the servants of God hoping, as with Job, to move them to despair and apathy. Satan knows he has won when we sit and do *nothing*.

If they crucified the Lord of Glory, what more will they do to those who follow him? If they rejected the Son of God, will they not also reject his disciples who seek to carry on proclaiming and living the Gospel of hope; those who by their actions hold a large mirror up to the world, of which they are a part?

Yet the Holy One, the eternal Son of God who chose to become the ultimate Suffering Servant could not be kept down. We thought he was dead. We thought he was out of our hair. We even washed our hands of him. Satan thought he had won. But that was not the end. Christ did die but entering into death he went to the very depths of hell and broke open the gates with a word of forgiveness and Love and triumphed over evil.

It is for this reason the suffering servant of Isaiah can exclaim: "The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; he who vindicates me is near."

So confident is the suffering servant that he even issues a challenge to his adversaries: “Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. It is the Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty?”

The servant of God can be bold in the face of rejection and suffering for no other reason than that it is God to whom he has to make account. It is God to whom he will have to answer some day, not those to whom God has sent him.

We would do well to remember this as we build our future. We would do well to hold on to this promise as we seek to build our common life on that which is positive and self-giving, shining as lights of the hope of a new dawn, a new way of being, a new sense of mission and purpose.

We would do well to hold on to this assertion whenever we confront the works of darkness. And we will confront them. By God we will confront them! Their cheers of “Hosanna” will turn to jeers of “Crucify him!” But this is not the end. There is light. There is a new beginning.